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The Grand Strategy of Charles de Gaulle
by
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While it can be argued that Charles de Gaulle was born a century too late, it cannot be denied that he was able to use his position as President of France to alter the international order of the day and to shape it more to his liking. His successes were due to his unswerving dedication to a world view which focused his considerable skills as a leader on a clear set of political, economic and military objectives. His failures stemmed from inherent flaws in that view and feelings bordering on paranoia regarding the Anglo-Saxon role in the Western Alliance.

Charles de Gaulle returned to power in 1958, after a 12-year absence from the French political scene. He brought with him a view of post-war Europe which contrasted sharply with that of Eisenhower, Macmillan, Adenauer and the other leaders of the Western Alliance. Instead of recognizing the benefits of the years of peace and security since 1945, de Gaulle saw a post-war Europe dominated by a powerful Anglo-Saxon political, military and economic order. He held strong prejudices against this Anglo-Saxon influence on the continent as well as painful memories of his "mistreatment" at the hands of Roosevelt during the Second World War.

De Gaulle's world view was centered on Europe and rooted in the concepts of the nineteenth century that he had studied as a young man. He envisioned a "Europe des patries," with borders ideally drawn around national homelands. It followed from this

perspective that nationalism was the only long-term political force of consequence. Communism, in his eyes, could only be a temporary deviation from the norm. In time the Soviet leadership would revert to the form of the inept Czars whose weak governments had allowed the disintegration of the Russian Empire. In his view, it was France's destiny to provide leadership and stability for Europe.

If de Gaulle's vision had been tempered by reality--the need for a strong alliance to offset the Soviet military threat and the value of America's post-war economic contribution--perhaps his rule would have been more palatable for all parties concerned. But de Gaulle felt that France had received a raw deal from the Allies and had been treated as a second-class citizen in the post-war arrangement. He saw the previous French regime as overly "concerned with pleasing others." De Gaulle had no doubt that he would provide the necessary leadership to restore France to her proper place in the world and to free Europe from NATO and other vestiges of the Anglo-Saxon hegemony.

De Gaulle did not see national survival as a matter of primary concern. He personally had helped defeat the Nazis. Communism, he felt, was doomed to self-destruction. He saw France's primary interest as the independence to act on its own, unencumbered by NATO, Bretton Woods or any other restrictions imposed from abroad. Once France had attained the freedom to act

independently, then she could reclaim her position of dominance in European affairs.

Between de Gaulle and his goal stood the Anglo-Saxon challenge. He viewed the "special relationship" between the U.S. and Britain as a vehicle for dominance and a direct threat to his vision of Europe. De Gaulle's wartime cronies--Eisenhower and Macmillan--were very slow to realize the extent of his feelings on this question. (In fact, years would pass before John Kennedy would comment that de Gaulle's strategy relied on a "certain tension" between France and the U.S.)

While de Gaulle was less concerned with the Soviet threat than conditions seemed to warrant, he did see France as being disadvantaged as long as she lacked her own nuclear capability. He considered the warheads under U.S. or NATO control as insufficient for France's security and, more importantly, as limiting French independence of action. Furthermore, they were another reminder of the Anglo-Saxon dominance he was determined to overcome. De Gaulle's insistence on building an independent nuclear force eventually led him to turn down U.S. offers to share weapons technology in return for French cooperation on the Multi-Lateral Force proposal and related NATO joint command issues.

While the independent "force de frappe" was a an element of power in implementing de Gaulle's grand strategy, France lacked the

resources to compete with either power bloc in terms of total force. France also lacked the clout to dictate economic policies on a grand scale. France's impact on military and economic affairs, therefore, was dependent on French influence within NATO and the Common Market. De Gaulle frequently used these fora to veto British and American initiatives. As Cook noted in the reading assignment, de Gaulle's "tactics of intransigence and non-cooperation" proved powerful in frustrating U.S. and British attempts to forge a stronger trans-Atlantic alliance.

The most important element of power in de Gaulle's grand strategy was his own political acumen and unflagging dedication to achieving his goals. He used all means at his disposal, including deception, when dealing with adversaries and allies. It is noteworthy that Eisenhower, Kennedy and MacMillan were unaware of the extent to which de Gaulle was willing to go to reduce their influence on European affairs.

De Gaulle's correct reading of the Berlin and Cuban crises brought on a turning point in relations with his Western colleagues. While he had stood with them in facing down the Soviets, he was first to realize that the construction of the Berlin wall and the withdrawal of Russian missiles from Cuba signalled a retreat by Khrushchev, who evidently lacked the will and force to confront the West. With that threat removed in 1963, de Gaulle felt free to push his own agenda more aggressively than ever. From then until his death, he would

continue to surprise his allies with apparent disregard for Western unity, not to mention collegial courtesies.

De Gaulle's specific goals were closely tied to his interest in restoring French independence and dominance in Europe. First on his list of objectives was the disappearance of the NATO command structure. He did not just want France out of NATO, he wanted NATO out of Europe. In its place, de Gaulle would organize a new continental defense system under French leadership. This system would function as a "Third Force," serving as an arbiter between the Russian and Anglo-Saxon camps as long as communists governed the Soviet Union.

De Gaulle also intended to fight the "dollar hegemony" by destroying the Bretton Woods accord and by ceasing to use the U.S. Dollar as the reserve currency. Gold would be the basis of international finance and a French-dominated European Common Market would provide the framework for trade and commerce.

In order to attain his objectives, de Gaulle implemented a strategy of cultivating the trust and support of other European leaders. The fledgling European Common Market provided the appropriate multilateral forum for this purpose. With French leadership, de Gaulle saw the Common Market as an infrastructure for a European-based order free of Anglo-American influence.

Bilateral relations with Germany also figured prominently in de Gaulle's strategy. One of his first initiatives was to enter into negotiations with Konrad Adenauer--unbeknownst to Eisenhower and MacMillan--for a Franco-German Treaty of cooperation. In this case de Gaulle was able to play off Bonn's desire to normalize post-war diplomatic relations with his own interest in weakening Anglo-American influence. Of course, Adenauer was unaware of de Gaulle's real motive for seeking the agreement. De Gaulle's management of these treaty negotiations provides a clear example of his willingness to deceive his allies in order to pursue his goals.

The remaining strategies de Gaulle employed were essentially negative. That is, they served to thwart others rather than to promote his own program. (It is often said that de Gaulle was much clearer in what he was against than in what he was for.) Although de Gaulle publicly encouraged British participation in the Common Market, Cook argues that he never had any intention of allowing them to join. This appears to be a fair assessment, since this game of deception gave de Gaulle time to maneuver before revealing his true intentions. When he finally vetoed British membership in January, 1963, it came as a shock to everyone and signaled a public break with Britain and the U.S. His argument was that Britain's "special relationship" with Washington would allow America to "swallow up the European Community."

Equally important were de Gaulle's efforts to undermine NATO. As previously noted, he refrained from any open break until after the resolution of the Berlin crisis in the early 60's. However, he had informed his NATO colleagues early on that France would reduce its participation because NATO did not meet French security requirements. There followed a series of steps beginning with the withdrawal of the French Mediterranean fleet from NATO to an eventual break with the NATO command. At the same time he proceeded with development of an independent French "force de frappe" which would give credence to his proposed "Third Force."

De Gaulle accompanied his withdrawal from the NATO command with moves toward a rapprochement with Moscow. Although the Soviets never appeared to take the "Third Force" argument seriously, they were more than willing to upgrade relations with France and to exploit de Gaulle's nationalistic policies in order to divide the West.

Other policy initiatives were employed to further distance France from the U.S. De Gaulle recognized communist China and--during the Viet Nam war--sent a letter of sympathy to Ho Chi Min regarding foreign intervention in his country. He publicly encouraged Third World countries to maintain their "independence from the hegemony of power blocs" and offered France as a model and leader of their cause. Although most of these initiatives

were short on substance, they produced the desired effect in the U.S. and underscored France's "independence" in foreign policy.

While de Gaulle's actions succeeded in frustrating his Anglo-American nemeses, they inevitably generated a series of mini-crises among his European colleagues. De Gaulle and Adenauer signed the Franco-German Treaty of cooperation within days of the General's double-barreled denial of British entry into the Common Market and rejection of cooperation with the U.S. on nuclear weapons. Given the furor surrounding the "surprise" treaty signing, the Bundestag was forced to declare that nothing in the agreement with France superseded West Germany's NATO obligations. This declaration was a severe setback to de Gaulle because his goal in negotiating with Adenauer was to weaken NATO.

On another occasion de Gaulle was hoisted on his own petard by the Common Market. When confronted with supranational requirements of the Common Market that weren't to his liking, de Gaulle demanded that the Treaty of Rome be altered to guarantee French sovereignty. To his surprise, other Common Market leaders refused to go along. Even after he withdrew the French permanent representative from the Common Market headquarters and threatened more drastic measures, other members followed the lead of Belgium and the Netherlands in rejecting the French proposal. He had promoted the Common Market as part of his master plan for Europe, but found that he could not bend it to his will.

In the end, de Gaulle's attempts at economic manipulation were limited to his personal rejection of the Bretton Woods agreement and to France's withdrawal from the American-British-French Central Gold Bank pool. Although he was unable to impose the gold standard on the rest of the world, de Gaulle's actions eventually would force President Nixon to take the dollar off of the gold standard in 1971.

Any analysis of de Gaulle's grand strategy must stress his resourcefulness and stature as a world leader. He was unexcelled in his ability to seize any and every opportunity to promote his cause. He used France's remaining power--along with her substantial prestige and influence--to maximize his efforts. In my opinion, however, de Gaulle's personalized statesmanship could not offset two basic weaknesses in his grand strategy. These flaws denied de Gaulle the international and domestic support necessary to achieve his ambitious goals.

The first problem was in de Gaulle's unorthodox, "back to the future" world view. After fighting two World Wars against Germany and facing the growth of communism in Eastern Europe, most Western European leaders were seeking a new order to guarantee the balance of power. In their eyes, American participation in any such arrangement was taken for granted because of America's relative strength and their need for support in confronting the Soviet Union. While many Europeans may have gone along with some constraints on American influence, few

wanted to see the U.S. dealt out of continental affairs. In the opinion of most, Europe could not even have returned to the pre-war status quo, much less to the nineteenth century!

An even more critical problem was de Gaulle's obvious lack of means to achieve his grandiose objectives. Even if had been able to muster greater support for his vision of Europe among his Common Market colleagues--an unlikely occurrence given his antiquated world view--France lacked the necessary economic and military resources to fill the role he had prescribed for her. Why he failed to understand the "iron linkage" can be debated by historians and by those who knew him personally. What is clear is that he failed to relate ends and means in his grand strategy.

To put de Gaulle's actions in perspective, we should keep in mind that America's post-war status as a superpower brought with it fears of American dominance that de Gaulle was able to exploit to his advantage. Many Third World leaders were ready to cheer anyone who would "stand up" to Washington. Many French nationalists were enthused by his promises of restored influence and prestige. For better or for worse, Charles de Gaulle is remembered by all and his legacy casts a long shadow over U.S.-French relations that will be with us for years to come.